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ABSTRACT

To inform Swedish program policy discussions, this study traced patterns in fictional television programing for children and young adults in Sweden. Three sets of questions were central to the inquiry. First, what does "the TV world" look like? Who lives there? Who are the dominant figures? What settings are depicted? How are socially relevant issues treated? How are problems solved? Second, is the TV world homogeneous? Do Swedish programs differ appreciably from imported ones? Do programs for adult audiences differ from those intended for juvenile audiences? Third, in what respects does the TV world differ from reality? What is emphasized, and what suppressed? What values and cultural patterns are thereby transmitted? Materials analyzed were total samples of the fictional programs offered 5 selected weeks at roughly 2-month intervals during 1980 and 1981. The sample was constructed so as to be representative of 1 year of Swedish television programing. Of the 60 narratives in the sample, 34 were of Swedish origin and 26 were imported. Materials were examined from two perspectives: that of "understanding," or Verstehen, and critical analysis. In addition to providing answers to many of the questions above, findings indicated the existence of certain fragments of an ideology involving individualism, liberty, confidence, respect, and traditional sex-role patterns. Also, several inadvertent messages were revealed. (RH)

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excerpts from "THE TV-WORLD" AND REALITY Part 1

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PEOPLE AND SOCIETY IN TELEVISION FICTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

PS 016045

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SR Audience and Programme Research Dept

The full report has the following content:
"THE TV-WORLD" AND REALITY (pages 1-5)
sketches the background of the project and the questions it addresses.

Part I. TELEVISION FICTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (pages 7-20)
describes the sample of programmes on which the study is based and the categories we have used in summarizing the material.

Part II. ANOTHER WORLD (pages 21-164)
describes the world we meet in juvenile fiction on our television screens. The respective chapters in this section highlight the sociological/demographic structure, the settings depicted, what happens in those settings, how various problems are solved, and who the dominant figures are.

Part III. VALUES AND PATTERNS (pages 165-201)
summarizes and discusses the views of man and society the programmes impart. A basic pattern of values emerges.

The following pages contain excerpts from the introduction and the concluding discussion.

* * *

"THE TV-WORLD" AND REALITY

"Information" was a watchword among Swedish broadcasting researchers during the 1970s. Numerous studies, both at the Audience & Programme Research Department (SR/PUB) and in university institutions, focussed on factual information and the news. We at SR/PUB have studied the audiences attracted by such programming, the importance of information gaps in society with respect to how various kinds of information get across to different groups of receivers, and how news and other factual messages are actually formulated.

By contrast, fictional content has not received much attention, despite the fact that it makes up such a great share of programming and its popularity among viewers and listeners.

Fictional programmes, too, teach us things. Thanks to television we are familiar, for example, with courtroom procedures, with routines in the surgical wards of hospitals, how films are made, what goes on at a meeting of the board of a large corporation, etc., etc., without necessarily having been party to any of these things in real life. Swedish television has acquainted us in recent years with the plight of landless farm labourers in Sweden into the early years of the present century through dramatizations of Swedish literary classics by Harry Martinsson and Moa Martinsson; we have been reminded of the horrors of the second world war through the American series, "Holocaust", and the British "Lifeline"; we have sat at the breakfast table at Southfork ("Dallas") and been initiated into the mysteries of modern Swedish hospitals through a serial dramatization of P.C. Jersild's recent best-seller. "The House of Babel".

Interiors, tools, clothes, routines, modes of behaviour - we can observe and assimilate such details into our concept of history and contemporary society, of foriegn cultures as well as our own. We are generally aware that the depiction is not documentary, but we tend to accept it as more or less realistic. However fanciful the story, we assume that it transpires in some semblance of reality.

In addition to the tangibles, the observable detail, we also absorb "hidden" information in the form of the code of norms and values underlying the events in the narratives. The stories may be said to "act out" or illustrate norms and values, goals and means, ideas and notions about the doings of our fellow man and of how society works. In this way, too, fictional content helps form our conception of reality.

Since 1967, a project at the Annenberg School of Communications in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has analyzed the content of the fictional programmes produced by the three major American networks, ABC, CBS and NBC. Director of the project is Professor George Gerbner. Some 100 hours of programming a year have been analyzed, which adds up to an enormous body of data from which to draw one's conclusions. Certain tendencies are more or less universal and explicit: three-fourths of the leading characters are male, white, middle- or upper-class Americans "in the prime of life", so to speak. Women make up only one-fourth of the total population of the TV world. Half the population are depicted as having jobs; of these no less than 60 percent own their own firms or are senior managers or academic professionals. Twenty percent are working class and office workers, and the remaining 20 percent are employed in police or military forces. Children and the elderly make up a very small share of the population. In short, the TV world is rather special.
Now one may object that fictional programmes never claimed to mirror reality as it really is. They are products of someone's imagination, usually conceived only for our amusement, on occasion to arouse our feelings. But, when we ask why, for example, women nearly always remain in the background and are cast in traditionally feminine roles - when they appear at all - we are told: "That's just how things are in the real world". "Imagination" knows limits after all, it seems.

Nor can the media offer an exact mirror-image of reality - though some may claim to - for the very simple reason that they haven't room for all of reality, not even all the media put together. Consequently, the media make a selection. They function as "showcases" and display what they consider "most important" and ""best". In a manner of speaking, all the media - television, radio, magazines, books, film, etc. - filter and process reality for us, applying their own "value filters". This processing is more or less deliberate, more or less formalized. Conventional news values are one such filter. Others are ideas about what the public wants, what the public will tolerate, what the public needs. Some aspects of reality simply do not pass through these filters, some get by only occasionally, while yet others qualify almost automatically as "good box-office".

Certain features of reality are emphasized in the TV world. That is our basic premise. They are "legitimate", established, interesting, worthy of note. That they are emphasized on TV reinforces or confirms their existence in reality. Other features are not emphasized, perhaps not even mentioned. They are not considered worthy of note; in the terminology of Gerbner and Gross they are victims of "symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978).

Applying this perspective to American television content, we may infer that white, middle- or upper-class males who are in the prime of life are most worthy of note according to American ideals. Women, children and the elderly are victims of symbolic annihilation - as are members of the working class.

One consequence of the media's value filters is a confirmation of the idea that the phenomena featured really are important and worthy of note, while the phenomena that are not given coverage are assumed to lack significance - indeed, their existence may be doubted.

Through the application of such value filters and their effect on programme content, television and radio and other media can influence norms and values in society at large. Thus, analyses of media content can give us an idea of the influences we are subjected to.

Television is a central social force, say Gerbner and Gross. There are now adults in our society who have never experienced life without television. The medium is pervasive, reaching nearly everyone from the cradle to the grave. In fact, television is about the only thing all members of society regardless of age, sex, education and social position, have in common.

Why, then, has it been so difficult to demonstrate effects of the medium? Mainly, Gerbner and Gross contend, because research on effects has been founded on a fallacious premise: research has generally sought to single out changes effected by television, often even effects of a single programme or, for that matter, of a given segment of a programme.
There are two things wrong with this endeavour: for one, it is television per se - television output in toto - that affects people - the constant stream of nearly identical messages could hardly help affecting us in some way. Secondly, the purpose of television content is not to bring about change:

> [Television] is an agency of the established order and as such serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than to alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs, an behaviors. Its chief cultural function is to spread and stabilize social patterns, to cultivate not change but resistance to change. Television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in a word, enculturation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p 175).

These considerations form our point of departure in the present study, in which we seek to describe the image of society and its members that television imparts. These sets of questions are central to the inquiry:

- What does "the TV world" look like? Who lives there (sex, age,occupation, etc.)? Who are the dominant figures, the heroes and villains? What settings are depicted? How are socially relevant issues treated? How are problems solved?

- Is the TV world homogeneous? Do, for example, Swedish programmes differ appreciably from imported ones? Do programmes for adult audiences differ from those intended for juvenile audiences?

- In what respects does the TV world differ from reality? What is emphasized, and what suppressed ("annihilated")? What values and cultural patterns are thereby transmitted to us?

In the longer term, our aim is to broaden the basis for hypotheses concerning the function and effects of television, while, closer to hand, we hope our findings will inform Swedish programme policy discussions.

Our material consists of total samples of the fictional programmes offered five selected weeks at roughly two-month intervals during 1980 and 1981. The sample was constructed so as to be representative of one year of Swedish television programming.

It has proven most practicable to undertake the analysis in two phases. This first report treats programmes for children and young people; a later report will treat fictional programmes for adult audiences.

Fictional programmes are defined as those that consist, wholly or mainly, of invented, visually dramatized stories. This includes content ranging from feature films and stage drama to stories illustrated with still pictures. Programmes with magazine-format may be included if fictional content predominates.

By programmes for children and young adults we mean (1) programmes offered during the regularly scheduled "children's block" and (2) programmes transmitted in other early evening time-slots that either were produced by the children's production unit or are about children and young people.[1)]

Of the sixty programmes/narratives for children and young people in our sample 34 are of Swedish origin and 26 are imports. Eleven foreign countries (in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Oceania) are represented. Although no one country of origin dominates, ten of the programmes/narratives are products of Anglo-Saxon cultures. One of the Swedish ("domestic") productions was set in Hong Kong.

Campared with adult programming, the share of domestic productions is rather large. In 1979/80, for example, only 17 percent of the fiction offered to adult audiences was of Swedish origin; the corresponding figure the following year was 19 percent (both measured in transmission time). The figures for juvenile fiction were 51 and 47 percent, respectively. (Fifty-nine percent of our juvenile sample is of Swedish origin.)

Three -foruths of the programmes transmitted for younger children in the afternoon/early evening are domestic products and one-fourth imports, whereas more than half the programmes offered later in the evening (which may thus be assumed to reach mainly elder children) are imports. Programmes for younger children have Swedish speech or narrators; programmes for elder audiences are mostly subtitled, although some also carry Swedish voice-over narration.

* * *

VALUES AND PATTERNS

Our assumption is that fictional narratives impart facts and myths about life and the world around us, that they thus contribute to our conception and understanding of reality.

Some of what such stories communicate to us is the product of careful design; some is purely incidental. Some messages or lessons are concrete and comparable to facts and information about people, things and events, whereas others are abstract, implicit, what we "read between the lines". We interpret what we see and hear, we formulate ideas, values and norms about what is right, what is important, what is related to what and why.

The residua of television content vary from individual to individual. We view different programmes, we attend to and interpret the stories more or

1) A secondary criterion is that the programme must be accessible to the Swedish-speaking viewer - subtitles at the very least. This criterion eliminated certain programmes for immigrant children from the sample.

less deeply and differently, depending on our personal experience, knowledge, maturity, intelligence and imagination. We assimilate concrete and abstract messages to different degrees, depending on how consonant they are with the images of reality we have formed. Some notions and facts fit in; others do not.

Consequently, it is meaningless to try by means of content analysis to determine how the television programming offered influences the audience. The process is much more complex than mere copying. What content analysis can tell us is what there is in the content that might influence the public. What messages does the programming contain? And what messages are missing? When we know this we shall have identified a central component in the debate over television effects.

What does programming teach us?

Here we shall compare certain aspects of the images of people and society offered in television fiction with reality. In doing so we are not, of course, out to judge how good a likeness the programming renders. That may be interesting enough in other contexts, but not here. The comparison will, however, yield an indication of the "value filter" through which the programming has passed. What elements are highlighted in the medium's rendering of humanity (and other creatures) and the societies they live in? What elements are suppressed?

"Value filters" (Chapter 2)

We note several marked differences between how the world of television fiction is populated and real demographics:

Sex: Men outnumber women in the world of fiction. The more fanciful the story, the greater the predominance of men.

Age: Elderly people are strongly underrepresented in the world of fiction.

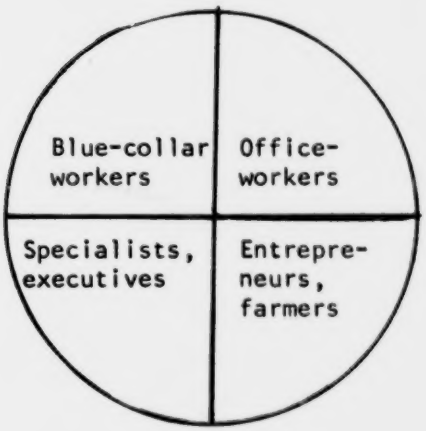
Work: Fewer people work for a living in the world of TV fiction than in reality. Women make up one-fourth of the gainfully employed, which is far less than in reality (45% of the labour force in Sweden).

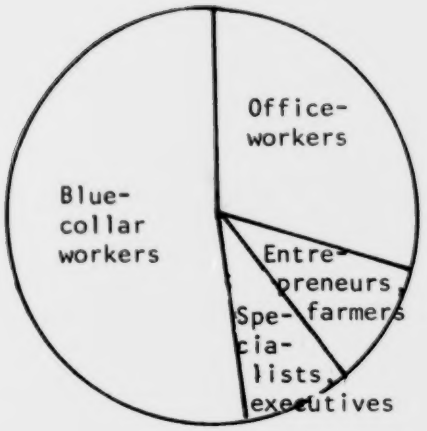
Occupations: The professions, business executives, professionals, entrepreneurs and farmers make up half the gainfully employed population on television - as against about one-fifth in reality. Blue-collar and office workers are correspondingly underrepresented ("symbolically annihilated" in Gerbner and Gross' terminology).

The world of fiction

Sweden

Four categories are nearly equally represented.





The most common occupations in the world of television are policemen, farmers and teachers, followed by actors, seamen and royalty. Both men and women are teachers; there are actresses as well as actors. All the other most common occupations are totally male.

This peculiar labour force may be partly a function of dramaturgical tactics, of efforts to streamline or vivify a situation by giving the characters easily identifiable occupations, of using standard narrative patterns or formulas in a selection of special settings.
In no case has the analysis of our material contradicted our preliminary observations as to the following valuations:

- Men are more important than women.
- Old people are not interesting.
- Women's work is unimportant compared to men's (furthermore, it is limited to a very few occupations).
- The "upper class" is interesting (among other things because of the power it wields).

The analysis did reveal important nuances, however.

An Idyll (Chapter 3)

Several factors explain the skew sociological make-up of the world of fiction. The milieux represented in fiction for young viewers are anti-quated. The business world is small-scale - even primitive - with skilled crafts, small shops, restaurants and other services predominating. Modern technology is largely lacking, as are heavy industry and large corporations. When industry does occur in our material, it is depicted as threatening: toward people, toward cultural life and the natural environment. Even agriculture is seldom represented, and when it occurs it is in the form of "the family farm".

Offices are the natural habitat of wielders of power. Hospitals are places where people receive good care. Prisons are places to escape from. Cultural life and amusements are largely the result of private initiatives. References to mass media are few.

The home and family are the hub of life. School, too, is a central institution, around which a good share of everyday life revolves.

Despite the fact that roughly half the stories purport to take place in the present, we find little sign of society as it is today. One may explain the anachronisms with references to the abilities and maturity of the intended audience: for pedagogical reasons it is necessary to simplify the story and the setting in which it takes place. The aspects of society that are most relevant to children and young people are not "city hall", the inner workings of the public sector, nor goings-on in commerce and industry or politics, but day-to-day life in the home and the classroom and the personal relationships that are developed in those settings.

Society as such is no more than a backdrop in most of the stories because we are looking at it from a child's point of view. We see work-places from the outside unless we are there in the role of customer or temporary guest. The home and the classroom are central because they are the domain of children and young people. Nonetheless, one may wonder what function the anachronisms in the backdrops may serve.

Codes and Modes of Behaviour (Chapter 4, 5 and 6)

Closer examination of the plots revealed certain recurring themes and patterns. Ranging from the individual "outwards" toward society at large, we note the following "lessons":

- People often feel lonely and abandoned
- One-parent families are nearly as common as two-parent ones. Other family structures are also possible.
- It is important to have a job so you can support yourself and (perhaps) your family or contribute to the household economy. (This applies mainly to boys and men, however.)
- Work has a psychological value in that through your work you (again mainly males) gain a sense of your identity.
- Rich people are few, but many of them are ruthless businessmen and women - and/or misers.
- The giving of gifts must be a sincere gesture with no ulterior motives, such as allaying one's guilty conscience.
- Immigrants and other minority groups are as good as anyone else and should be treated like anyone else.
- We must respect and protect the natural environment.
- People who struggle to escape from a bad situation are doing the right thing. ("Freedom isn't handed to you; it has to be won.")
- Problems of juvenile delinquency (shoplifting, alcohol and drug abuse, vandalism) are generally symptoms of problems within the family or other personal problems. Persons who show such symptoms need both the demands and support of parents and friends.
- Egoistic and despotic regimes and power-figures must be combatted.
- Power is often a threat. People who abuse their power or authority are evil. People who share and help others are good.

- Most problems are solved through the efforts of individuals.
- Collaboration for a common cause is rare. Although many problems are solved through mutual cooperation, it is usually a case of the group helping an individual overcome his or her personal problems.
- Sometimes - but rarely - one must resort to violence in order to rectify a situation of evil.
- A certain amount of trickery - "white lies" and the like - is permissible in order to achieve an honourable and much desired goal. Powerful adversaries are the "fairest game" in this context.
- Boys and girls are quite like each other up until the teen years, but then they are very different. Teen-aged boys are deeply involved in many activities and make plans for the future - something teen-aged girls don't do.
- Girls and women tend to get into trouble that they cannot get out of on their own. Men and boys, on the other hand, can generally handle the situation - whatever the odds - perhaps even "saving a damsel in distress" or two in the process.
- The realm of fantasy is a man's world: the more fanciful the story, the fewer the females.
- Men seem more important, more interesting and more dynamic than women inasmuch as they figure more prominently in television stories. They seem to have more "options" in life - in their choice of both occupation and "life-style" - since they are depicted as "fitting in" in widely varying milieux and contexts.
  Women's options seem more confined since women are depicted ("cast") in a narrower range of roles.

CONCLUSION

Two Surfaces

In the above themes and patterns we can discern certain fragments of an ideology: individualism, liberty, confidence, respect, traditional sex-role patterns.

Individualism

All the stories are built up around individual characters, which makes it easier for the audience to relate to the plot (through identification, empathy, etc.). The underlying motives indicated in our analysis largely revolve around character delineation (in the singular). Favourable attributes in this regard are confidence and harmony as well as initiative, resoluteness, self-reliance and personal integrity.

This emphasis on the individual is understandable from several points of view, but it has one adverse, presumably unintentional consequence: fixation on the individual risks "annihilating" the group, giving the impression that collectives (our social context) do not exist, nor would they serve any purpose if they did. The focus on individuals leads, in short, to individualism, a social doctrine which holds individual rights and capabilities supreme, and in which social structures and expressions of mutuality are largely lacking.

Liberty

Few and weak social links give strong individuals - good and evil - the leeway to exert considerable influence. Egoistic and despotic figures must, however, be combatted if individual liberty and human rights are to survive. Here the emphasis is on the liberty and rights of "underdogs" against all form of illegitimate rule and oppression. In this light both political and economic power tends to be threatening.

Confidence and Respect

Individualism notwithstanding, no man is an island. People need people. Solitude is not a natural human state. Consequently, the people in our immediate surroundings are important. Families may vary in size and structure, the important thing is that there is someone there - that we are not homeless waifs, alone and adrift in the world. The causes of juvenile delinquency are to be found in troubled or non-existent domestic and personal relationships.

Oppression and disregard for others' rights in whatever form are evil. Sometimes violence must be resorted to, but only very seldom. There is a humane understanding of criminality. Similarly, there is an acceptance of immigrants and minorities as equals. We must show respect for Mother Nature, and helpfulness is a virtue.

Traditional Sex-Roles

The image of women that television imparts is largely anachronistic and stereotyped. Men are generally depicted as having higher status than women - the exceptions noted occur mainly among children. Some settings are totally male; in others women exist, but only as background figures outside the limelight. Situations in which men play second fiddle to women are extremely rare. Strangely, we find hardly any women in more fanciful settings.

* * *

At first, these impressions seem fragmentary and incompatible, but this is because we are actually faced with two separate levels or surfaces: people in the foreground and society as a backdrop. Putting it somewhat more pointedly, we are dealing with a differentiated, generous and tolerant rendering of individuals in the foreground, but a stereotyped, vague and anachronistic image of society. The inequalities noted between men and women are part of this crudely rendered backdrop.

In conclusion;

Emphasis on the individual - Society "annihilated"

At the outset we referred to Gerbner and Gross' contention that the main function of television is to school people into standardized roles and modes of behaviour, to inculcate and reinforce social and cultural patterns. Television, they observe, highlights certain aspects of reality, while it disregards, or even suppresses, others.

In our study of the people and social structures depicted in Swedish television fiction we, too, found certain aspects to be stressed and others suppressed. Since we have applied qualitative as well as quantitative methods to our material, we are able to go further than the strictly quantitative American studies in describing the milieux, events and people behind the tallies. In this way we seek to form a total view of the content and to grasp something of the ideology underlying it.

We have examined the material from two perspectives: the one, what is generally referred to as the perspective of "understanding" or Verstehen and, secondly, a critical analysis. The two treatments reveal, in addition to the intended messages or lessons, a number of messages that would appear to be quite inadvertent.

The picture that emerges is dual: In the foreground we see individuals and their closest friends and relations, richly and carefully delineated. In this portion of the picture the dominant values are confidence, respect and liberty. In the background we see society as a dimly lighted set representing an old-fashioned idyll. The vagueness of the references to broader social relationships, coupled with the emphasis on individuals and their personal relations, results in an overall impression of individualism and an absence of shared goals as the basis for human activity. We see inequalities between men and women as a consequence of this poorly articulated view of society.

We dare venture that television fiction is homogeneous in respect of the basic values it imparts. No explicit conflicts of values are displayed. Gerbner and Gross came to the same conclusion in their study and reasoned that given this homogeneity, television can hardly help but influence us.

Children in Sweden are heavy consumers of television. During their nine years of compulsory education Swedish children spend some 6,900 hours in the classroom (providing they are never absent) and fully 6,300 hours in front of their TV-sets - on average. Of course, all this time is not devoted to juvenile fare exclusively. Adult programming enters the TV-diet at an early age. Particularly for younger children, however, "children's programmes" are most important - perhaps especially because of the opportunities for identification they offer. Consequently, the values and norms they communicate are an important concern.

In this study we have traced patterns in fictional programming that may not be apparent in our normal day-to-day viewing, but which emerge when we subject a large number of programmes to systematic analysis. Only when we have perceived the patterns can we decide whether they are good or bad and grasp their impact on us. The next step is to see what we can do about changing the patterns we don't like.

This study was initiated by SR/PUB and sponsored by Sveriges Television AB.